



Middle Eastern Christian Conference: Safeguard the Assyrians of the Nineveh Plains

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(AINA) -- The Middle Eastern American Convention for Freedom and Democracy in the Middle East (MEAC) convened in Washington DC on October 1, 2004 under the sponsorship of the Lebanese Christian, Coptic, and Assyrian (also known as Chaldean, and Syriac) communities including organizations such as the American Lebanese Coalition, US Copts, and the Assyrian American National Federation (AANF). The organizers of the convention explained the two fundamental reasons for bringing together the indigenous Christians of the Middle East together. First, the grouping of Assyrians, Copts, and Lebanese Christians was designed to highlight the common pressures, persecutions, and crises commonly shared by the indigenous communities of the Middle East and to underscore the widespread, regional basis of their circumstances. Secondly, the convention sought to demonstrate that because of the disproportional persecution suffered by the indigenous peoples of the Middle East, over three-quarters of Middle Eastern Americans are indigenous Christians and are neither Arab nor Muslim.



The common misperception that most, if not all, Middle Eastern Americans are Arabs has been propagated by a clever media scheme orchestrated by the Arab American Institute (AAI). Despite a previous grievance filed by Assyrians and Maronites (AINA, [10-27-2001](#)), the AAI [website](#) continues to list Assyrians (tabulated as Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs), Maronites, and Copts in the US as Arab Americans. As one organizer noted, "The issue of identity is not simply a matter of semantics. Rather, the AAI has amassed considerable political capital and respect by claiming to represent the 3.5-4 million Middle Eastern Americans in the US." Another participant noted "Not only do we (indigenous Christians) reject the Arab identity, but the AAI's political agenda is antagonistic and foreign to our groups' as well." Common complaints include the Arab group's insensitivity to massacres against Copts by Islamic fundamentalists in Egypt, silence on the occupation of Lebanon by its Arab neighbor Syria, and apathy towards continued attacks against Assyrians by Kurds and Arabs in Syria and Iraq. As one observer summarized, "the AAI has cynically capitalized on our numbers while at the same time pursuing a totally alien agenda." For other participants, the "[Arabization](#)" policy of the AAI is an enraging reminder of the same sort of policy executed by the likes of Saddam Hussein and Hafez Assad. One elderly man lamented, "just when we thought we had safely escaped Arabization in the Middle East, we find that the AAI is trying to impose the very same policy here in the US."

The convention highlighted that 77-78 % of Middle Easterners are Christian. How a minority in the Middle East becomes an overwhelming majority in diaspora was summarily explained by one Assyrian leader as "simply put, overwhelming persecution leads to overwhelming flight."

The keynote speech on behalf of the Assyrian community was presented by Mr. Robert Dekelaita, a self-described ChaldoAssyrian. Mr. Dekelaita is a prominent human rights attorney in Chicago and on the executive committee of the Assyrian Academic Society ([AAS](#)). Mr. Dekelaita described the growing crisis facing ChaldoAssyrians in Iraq and the need for the safeguarding of the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq as an administrative region for ChaldoAssyrians. In the context of the convention's theme of advocating freedom, democracy, and pluralism in the Middle East, Mr. Dekelaita emphasized that preserving the ChaldoAssyrian presence in the Nineveh Plains as a vibrant part of the Iraqi mosaic was the "litmus test" for safeguarding minority rights in general throughout the Middle East. Echoing the same sentiment, Ms. Nina Shea of [Freedom House](#) likened the ChaldoAssyrians in Iraq to "canaries in a coal mine," and urged all to support the community in their struggle for survival. Mr. Michael Meunier, one of the organizers of the convention from US Copts also appealed that all organizations present should concentrate their efforts on the ChaldoAssyrian community in Iraq that was currently most at risk.

Some smaller Islamic organizations were also allowed to participate in the conference in order to show their commitment to freedom and democracy. Participation by a lesser known Kurdish group, the Kurdish Patriotic Union (KPU), however, caused rancor amongst the Assyrian delegation. The KPU pressed for Kurdish autonomy without similar guarantees for Assyrians in the Nineveh Plains and threatened secession if their demands were not met. The Kurdish position was presented in a pre-banquet forum entitled "Threatened Minorities." With recent Kurdish attacks against Assyrians in northern Iraq still fresh in their minds, some Assyrians noted that "Kurds are threatening -- not threatened -- minorities such as Assyrians, Yezidis, and Turkman." Pointing to recent forceful land grabs, and [attacks](#) against Assyrian villages as well as targeted assassinations of

leaders and random [killings of civilians](#), the observer added "inviting brutal occupiers of Assyrian lands to this convention is as totally inappropriate as inviting the Syrian regime to pledge rights to Lebanese Christians. A brutal occupier is a brutal occupier."

The much heralded Syrian Reform Party (SRP) was similarly seen as an affront to the Assyrian cause. In their final resolution, the SRP representative called for a change in the Syrian regime, withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, and recognition of Arabic and Kurdish as official languages. There was no mention of the Assyrian community in Syria as the only indigenous people of Syria or of the Syriac language, the indigenous language of Syria that predates the Arabization -- let alone the even more recent Kurdish infiltration -- of the region. One Assyrian participant noted, "We have seen the same tacit agreement between Arabs and Kurds to deny our existence in Iraq where we were referred to as Christian Arabs or Christian Kurds. We don't see this as reform, but rather the continuation of cultural hegemony and the policy of denying our existence." By ignoring Assyrian Christians in Syria, the SRP seems inclined only to exchange the tyranny of Bashar Assad with their own -- a tyranny that carves up Syria into Arab and Kurdish spheres at the expense of the indigenous Assyrian Christians."

Even Ms. Zainab al-Suwaij, an Iraqi Shiite moderate, a celebrated champion of tolerance and moderation, refused to acknowledge the Assyrian Christian presence in Iraq by name. The omission of Christians in Iraq during this period when Assyrian Christians are purposely targeted and forced to flee en masse was angrily described by one attendee as "deliberate, malicious, and egregious and calls her sincerity into serious question."

In the final analysis, the convention was successful in underscoring the general deteriorating circumstances confronting the indigenous Christians of the Middle East and in denying an Arab identity for these groups. Mr. James Rayis, a prominent Assyrian attorney from Atlanta, reiterated Mr. Dekelaita's points in the final convention resolution. Still more, for Assyrians, the convention program proved a valuable vehicle for spotlighting the crisis facing Assyrians and the need to guarantee their safety in the Nineveh Plains. The anti-Assyrian positions of groups such as the KPU and the SRP highlighted the impossibility of adding groups who do not share a commitment to democracy and pluralism to any future convention of Assyrians, Copts, and Lebanese Christians.





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